

'Comics'

for the Historian

Eric Simpson

Historians have long been accustomed to use visual material as a valuable form of evidence. This can range from medieval illuminated manuscripts to images derived from the latest digital technology. Jokey illustrations too are evidence and some historians have traditionally used them to tell a story or ram home a point. The satirical cartoons of Gilray and Cruickshank, for example, reveal a lot about attitudes and opinions in late Georgian times, and the volumes of *Punch* have long been a staple source for nineteenth and twentieth century-period historians.

One perhaps less regarded form of illustration is the comic postcard, a genre which burst into popularity in the early years of the twentieth century. Postcards first came into legal use in Britain on 1 October 1870. Although they had no illustrations then, they were speedily recognised as a cheap means of communication. The Rev Francis Kilvert was quick off the mark, recording on 4 October 1870: 'Today I have sent my first postcards ... They are capital things, simple, useful and handy. A happy invention'.¹ Useful they may have been but there were some constraints to their use. Firstly, only the official Post Office cards could be sent at the cheap halfpenny rate, a ban which was only removed in 1894. In the same year the first illustrated cards appeared. The illustrations were, however, on the small side and had limited appeal. The fact that the message could only be written on the same side as the illustration was another constraint. When this limitation was removed in 1902, the picture postcard as we know it was born. It was then that the postcard boom commenced.

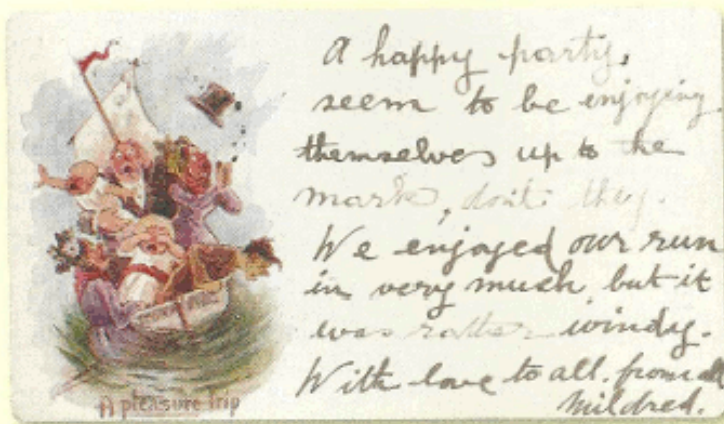


Fig.1: An early Cynicus card, with both card and message on the same page (posted in Edinburgh in September 1901).

With a reasonably-sized illustration now possible, a huge variety of attractive pictorial cards poured from the printing presses. Valentine's of Dundee was just one of many photographic

firms that saw this as a new and profitable outlet, sending their photographers out to meet the burgeoning demand for local views. It was also common practice to use old stock. If a view with people in old-style dress rendered the card too dated, then the oldsters were removed and more up-to-date figures introduced. The Soviet Communist method of rewriting photographic history was by no means a new practice. The original cards had been comparatively small, but in 1899 a larger size came into use and this size – 5½ x 3½ inches – became the standard size for the next sixty years or so.



Fig.2: 'The Ideal Husband' postcard pokes fun at the feminist movement (a pre-1914 Millar & Lang card).

Postcards of all types came into vogue because they were a cheap, speedy and attractive way to send a message in the days when few people had access to a telephone. In the early twentieth century the great majority of telephones belonged to businesses. Thomas Livingstone, a Glasgow shipping clerk, was, as revealed in his wonderfully-illustrated diaries *Tommy's War*, one of the few ordinary people who had the privilege of sending and receiving personal phone calls via his firm's telephone.² But he too, like most people, used the postcard for despatching important messages. With several deliveries a day in built-up areas, the Post Office provided a very speedy and efficient service: 'Meet me tomorrow arriving on the noon train' was a fairly common type of message. Above all, though, the picture postcard is associated with the seaside holiday. Despatching them to friends was near obligatory showing them for example – 'This is where I'm spending my holiday'.

Picture postcards embrace a huge range of topics and collecting became a popular hobby. Cards of all types were collected, many of them preserved in albums, thus saving them for posterity and

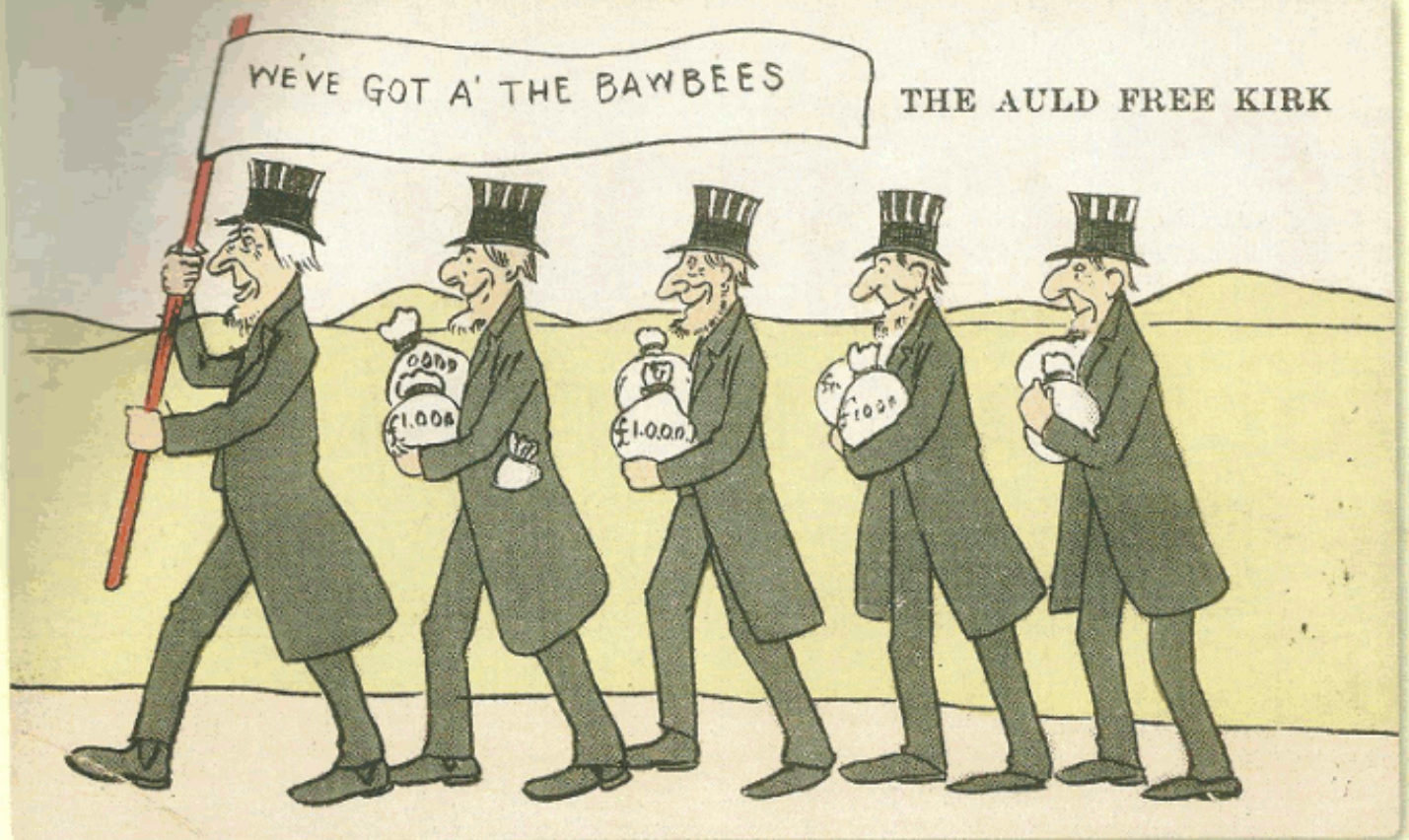


Fig.3: A skit on the House of Lords judicial decision in 1904 that aroused a lot of ire in Scotland. Shades of more recent Supreme Court decisions? (a Millar & Lang undated card).

becoming a boon to present day collectors. Social historians and students of local history seize upon topographical cards as valuable source material for illustrating change over time. Local historians wish to know what their home town or other place of interest looked like in days gone by. We see busy shops and factories that are now long gone. We see too now-empty harbours that were once packed with vessels. The writing on the back, brief though the messages are, can sometimes also be historically useful. While topographical cards have obvious utility as historical sources, one type of card has been comparatively neglected – namely the comic postcard. This in spite of being a type of card that was very popular and one that was produced in huge quantities.

Comic post cards can also have historical value. Capturing contemporary fads and changing fashions, they reflect the interests and preoccupations of a particular period of time. They illustrate what were then current issues and controversies. Quite unintentionally, they reflect social change and thus, like *Punch* cartoons, become mini-time capsules.

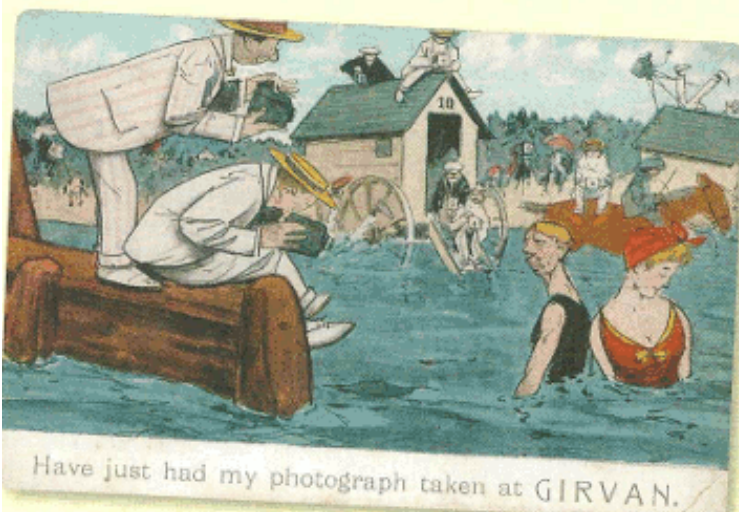


Fig.4: While fashionable young men with cameras are prominent in this card, bathing machines and the horse that pulled them into the sea also feature (a Valentine's card posted in Girvan in July 1915 but which with a simple name change could be sold anywhere).

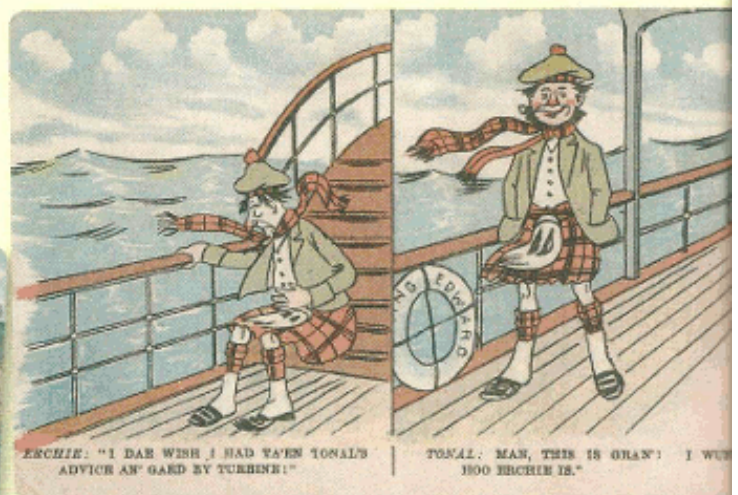


Fig.5: In this postcard Tonal on the new turbine *King Edward* clearly had the advantage of seasick Erchie seated on the paddle-box of a pitching paddle-steamer (an undated Millar & Lang card).

In Fig.2 'The Ideal Husband', the allusion to the contemporary suffragette campaign is fairly obvious. Other cards may, however, refer to largely forgotten controversies. The 'We've Got A' The Bawbees' postcard is certainly one such. The reference is to a hot religious controversy of the early 1900s. In 1900 two major Presbyterian churches, the Free and the United Presbyterian, combined to form, the United Free Church. A minority, though, broke away claiming to

be the genuine Free Church and thus entitled to all the possessions of the original Free Church. This claim by the largely Highland Free Kirk was rejected by the Scottish courts. When the case was taken to the House of Lords, their lordships in their wisdom took everyone by surprise by declaring in favour of the Free Kirk – thus the card – ‘We’ve Got A’ The Bawbies’. So loud was the outcry at this manifestly unfair decision that Parliament had to intervene to reverse the decree.

THE WATER IS RIGHT UP TO MY EXPECTATIONS



Fig.6: Since Mary, who sent this postcard to Delia in Maryhill had found ‘plenty of clicks’, while holidaying in Saltcoats, she presumably comprehended the double entendre (a Millar & Lang card posted in August 1919).

In other ways postcards are of their time, as we see in the kind of card popular with holidaymakers. We see people travelling by train or steamboat. In the older seaside postcards, dookers employ bathing machines, which disappear from later cards. They often reflect new ideas and innovations. The arrival of the lady cyclist, for example, was one source of humour. When the cheap Box Brownie camera came on the scene, artists seized upon it as a comic device. One such card depicts a bathing beauty being besieged by a mob of eager young males competing for the best vantage point.

From today’s perspective, a measure of specialist knowledge is often necessary to get the point of the story, as when artists allude to another Edwardian development - the turbine steamer. For people in the West of Scotland who spent their holidays in ‘doon the watter’ resorts, the Clyde paddle steamers were a subject of great public interest and this was reflected in the many cards devoted to the subject. When in 1901 a new vessel appeared on the Clyde, the *King Edward*, it received a great deal of attention, since it was the world’s first passenger steamer propelled by turbines. The new screw-propelled turbine steamer was faster and smoother than the contemporary paddle-steamer, so the traveller was less likely to be seasick.³

Typically, though, much comic postcard humour is crude and vulgar and many people looked down on them for this reason. Though polite society may have frowned on them, George Orwell, on the other hand, wrote a seminal essay on the subject ‘The Art of Donald McGill’ in *Horizon*, 1941.⁴ Donald McGill (1875-1962) was easily the best known and the most prolific of all postcard artists. McGill’s comic postcards are the epitome of what Orwell called ‘low’ humour. What Orwell termed ‘comics’ are the opposite of political correctness. They are sexist and they stereotype people, eg the fat bossy lady, the hen-pecked husband, the mean Scotsman easily identified by his kilt which tends to blow up in the air when there is any wind. A common type depicts a kilted Scotsman finding devious ways to enjoy a cheap holiday.

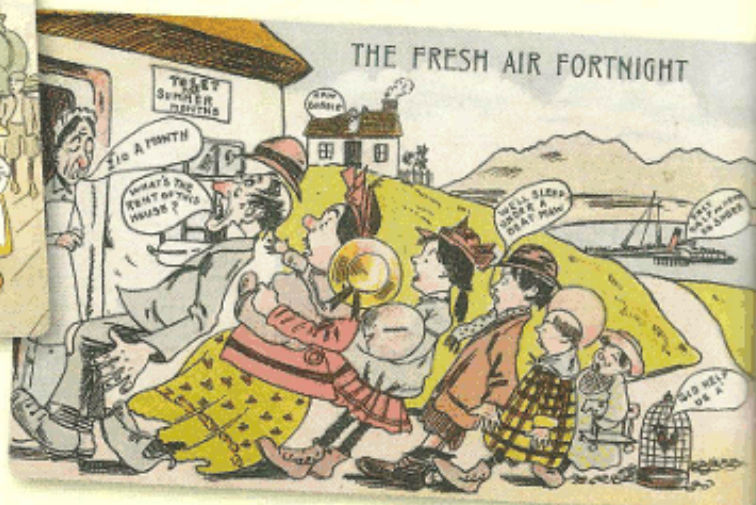
Postcard art can be cruel, as exemplified in some of the artwork of Martin Anderson from Tayport in Fife. Anderson (1854-1932) used the pen name of Cynicus – a most appropriate name for this sardonic artist. Things going wrong were his speciality. One of his favourites was the depiction of the Last Train or Last Boat from a specific place – eg the Last Boat from Aberdour with holidaymakers crowding on to an already overcrowded vessel. The message on this, as on many other cards, was transferable with the Last Boat from Aberdour becoming the Last Boat from Millport or Margate or wherever. For Anderson, like many another comic artist, seasick passengers on a wee boat was another favourite subject (see first image). From his business profits Anderson built himself a mansion – known as Castle Cynicus. At times, though, the humour of the Cynicus cards could be very bitter and bleak – even cruel. Bleak though was his ending. His postcard publishing business crashed in 1911 and he lived in poverty until his death in 1932. He was buried in an unmarked grave. A sardonic twist to the very end for an artist who specialised in the dark side of humour.

Above all the comic postcard artist uses large dollops of sexual innuendo. Some local authority councils had censorship committees which banned cards they considered just too obscene. Artists would try to avoid being banned by ensuring that their more saucy cards had a double meaning. But being a postcard publisher was still a risky business. Donald McGill was put on trial in Lincoln in 1954 under the Obscene Publications Act of 1857. He was found guilty and duly fined. The fear caused by this prosecution led to large stocks of cards being destroyed and some small card publishers going out of business. For decades, though, risqué cards like ‘The Water is Right Up to My Expectations’ had been published with no apparent problem.



Fig.7 (above): 'Off to the Coast' is the title but there is no luggage of any kind in sight (an undated Millar & Lang card).

Fig.8 (below): As well as casting aspersions on 'coast' landladies, this card's Fresh Air Fortnight caption alludes to a subject that was in the public eye in the early twentieth century. The Glasgow Poor Children's Fresh Air Fortnight fund supported holiday homes at Prestwick and Saltcoats (a Millar & Lang card with postmark obscured).⁸



While Donald McGill cards are signed and Martin Anderson's identifiable by the use of his pen name, most comic postcards are anonymous. Unfortunately this is true of this writer's favourite comic cards. These are postcards that were produced in the early years of the twentieth century by the Glasgow firm of Millar & Lang.⁵ Millar & Lang didn't just publish comic cards. They published a huge variety of cards and other illustrative material, including some of genuine artistic merit.⁶ Incidentally, their Art Nouveau office building (both exterior and interior) at 46-50 Darnley Street, Glasgow, is a work of art in its own right.⁷ My reason for liking their comic cards is because the humour in many of them is targeted at a regional clientele – typically from Glasgow and the West of Scotland. Millar & Lang published many postcards that are distinctive by their use of Glaswegian dialect and by their references to local ways and customs. They are designed for people who go to the 'coast' (the West of Scotland term then in use for going to the seaside).

Since most 'comics' were purchased by holidaymakers, the holiday experience itself was a favourite subject with publishers. Millar & Lang, for example, printed many cards depicting plebeian Glasgow heading 'doon the watter' and celebrating raucously while 'at the coast'. A favourite type of postcard with many publishers satirizes overcrowded holiday accommodation. While such cards are obviously grossly

exaggerated, there was an element of truth in these skits as landladies did pack them in. Rapacious landladies were another source of sometimes cruel humour.

Donald McGill may have fallen foul of over-scrupulous legal bodies, but in 1994 the Royal Mail marked 100 years of the picture postcard by issuing five stamps bearing near reproductions of traditional comic postcards. However, the Royal Mail played it safe by issuing tame versions of these cards. The same images were also reproduced as postcards, thus maintaining an old tradition. But search in newsagents' shops nowadays and you will be fortunate to find anything resembling the saucy postcard of the golden years of the seaside holiday. Some reproductions are, however, available on the internet. Many people still send postcards when on holiday, but in our internet and mobile phone era few would consider them for sending messages. As for the traditional saucy postcard, a very British type of humour, it has gone the same way as most of the traditional British holiday resorts. Both were very much of their time, a very different time and a less complicated one from the present. In 1941 Orwell found them on sale everywhere ... 'they can be bought in nearly every Woolworth's, for example.' But, sadly or otherwise, the traditional comic postcard has vanished from the High Street, just like Woolworth's shops themselves.

Notes & References

- 1 W Plomer, ed. *Kilvert's Diaries*, Vol.1 (Jonathan Cape, 1969), p.236.
- 2 T C Livingston, *Tommy's War: a First World War diary* (Harper Press, 2008), p.160.
- 3 So successful was the *King Edward* that ship-owning companies like the Cunard Line followed suit, equipping large liners like the *Lusitania* and the *Mauretania* with turbine engines. One of the *King Edward's* turbine engines is on show at the Riverside Museum, Glasgow.
- 4 Millar & Lang Ltd postcards did not necessarily bear the company's name. They were published under a number of different trademarks, such as the National Series and the Art Publishing Co, Glasgow.
- 5 www.george-orwell/The_Art_of_Donald_McGill0.html.
- 6 A W Coysh, *The Dictionary of Picture Postcards in Britain 1894-1939* (Antique Collectors' Club, 1984), p.170.
- 7 www.pollokshieldsheritage.org/millarlang.html.

- 8 The messages on the back of postcards can give brief glimpses into other people's lives. The rhyming message on this card (signature initials only), posted to a gentleman in Torridon, is particularly intriguing. It reads like someone taking the mickey:

Please excuse the liberty
 Don't expose me for your life
 I'm writing just to ask you if you want a faithful wife
 I'll wash and darn your socks
 I'll mend and iron your shirt
 I'll keep your cottage tidy and promise not to flirt.

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